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TRAVEL

SCENERY TO DINE FOR

Gill Martin forgets about the calories and goes hedonistic hiking in Tuscany

IN the Tuscan courtyard a table decked in chintzy tablecloth is stacked high with a lunch fit for hungry hikers: asparagus salad dusted with parmesan shavings, blood oranges with pumpkin seeds, sheep's cheese with pear, sweet chestnut and honey, artichokes in golden olive oil, chewy wild boar sausages, strong pork salami with fennel, chunks of unsalted bread and local red and white wines of Chianti.

We fall upon this feast like locusts, savouring and devouring, quaffing and unashamedly going back for seconds.

Well, we deserve it. We have hiked our hearts out all morning, working off a magnificent breakfast, exercising our right to roam on wooded hills of pines, chestnut and oak, wheat fields and vineyards, up gently rolling hills of

Tuscany and down her stony paths.

If your idea of hiking conjures up images of hearty types with stout boots, mud-spattered legs and soggy sandwiches then think again. I've discovered hedonistic hiking. While modern campers have morphed into glamper so pleasure-seeking walkers have made the comfort connection.

Instead of wind and rain-lashed yomps over bleak terrain fuelled by mediocre snacks we opted for spring-in-our-steps walking in Italian sunshine, with a heady mix of regional cuisine, liberal amounts of wine and even a cooking lesson to unravel the secret of perfect ravioli.

Fine dining, gourmet picnics and glorious walks off the beaten tracks of Chianti, popping into medieval churches are all on the menu of our Tuscan Harvest tour which started and ended in Pisa. And yes, you can climb the 12th century leaning tower now it has been stabilised in an epic restoration project.

We had been furnished with a comprehensive packing list which the novices among us found daunting on a no-frills airline with weight restrictions.

- Waterproof walking boots with good grip and ankle support. (We were under instructions to: Allow sufficient time to wear in new boots prior to the trip plus advice to: travel in your walking boots).
- Waterproof jacket and trousers
- Walking poles (useful – not essential)
- One pair of lightweight quick-drying walking trousers that zip off to shorts
- Quick-drying shirt for walking.
- Walking socks
- Warm fleece
- Small rucksack (around 20lt in size) to carry water, waterproofs, camera
- Sun hat, sun cream and sunglasses
- Travel sickness pills if required
- Plastic bags for lining rucksack to keep things dry in case of rain

I admit to ignoring the waterproof

trousers diktat. This was Italy, after all. But walking poles took pressure off my knees (one recently broken in a ski accident) on slippery slopes and toughish climbs.

Hedonistic Hiking (www.hedonistichiking.com) is the brainchild of Jackie and Mick Parsons, a jolly couple with a passion for food, wine and walking. The inspiration for the title of their guided walking company emerged during a brain storming/Chianti drinking session, an apt choice for foodies and wine-lovers.

And a delight for those who prefer to lay their heads on a soft pillow in a glorious hotel - ours was the four star Palazzo Leopoldo (www.palazzo Leopoldo.it), formerly a noble residence dating back to 1310, in the charming village of Radda-in-Chianti.

From its sun terrace we drank in the sweeping views of Chiantishire and glasses of Prosecco to plot our hiking route for the next day with guide Jackie.

"Expect rain", she warned as thunder clouds gathered. Our spirits rose over the most delicious dinner at the nearby Ristorante La Botte di Bacco where two brothers team up as chef and sommelier to provide Tuscan specialities with local wines.

Hedonism started early with little flans with Savoy cabbage and ricotta, anchovies and lemon, gnocchetti with spinach and sausage and a choco-holic's fix of filo parcel doused in hot chocolate sauce.

The morning dawned bright, pigeons cooing a wake-up greeting from the lichen-covered rooftops, fluffy white clouds in a blue sky. Breakfast in the enormous kitchen offered yet another calorific spread to fuel our first hike in the Montagnola hills west of Siena.

In the distance we picked out the towers of St Gimignano, where Tea With Mussolini was filmed. We followed the paths of ancient merchants



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TRAVEL FACTS

- **HEDONISTIC HIKING'S** tours are created for a maximum of 16 guests with two experienced and knowledgeable guides accompanying them. Hikes consist of both gentle and more challenging walks, but are never competitive and a support vehicle is always on hand if guests choose to take a break. Hedonistic Hiking is eco-certified, committed to sustainability and believes in fully supporting small local-run businesses.
- Tours are made up of far more than glorious walks; they hope to uncover regional culture, history, festivals and traditions.
- Meals include a mixture of fine dining in local restaurants and gourmet picnics designed to sample the best foods and wines in the area.
- A Tuscan Harvest starts and ends in Pisa, taking guests off the beaten track to remote castles, formal gardens and the vineyards of Chianti. Free time in medieval Siena to explore Piazza del Campo, venue for bi-annual world-famous Palio horse-race. The additional accommodation is another 4* Hotel Suvera.
- Prices for the 8 day tour start at £2060 per person, based on two people sharing, with a single supplement of £173.
- This includes 7 nights accommodation, all meals with wine, a support vehicle on hikes, experienced guides, return transport from Florence, pre-trip information, luggage



- transport and museum visits.
- For more information, visit www.hedonistichiking.com, or call +44 (0)1858 565148.
- Trips: September 21-28 2014 or October 1-8 2015.
- Return flights to Pisa start from £60 with Easy Jet, for more information visit www.easyjet.com
- Hedonistic Hiking offers a 'Palio of Siena' tour that mixes the thrilling race, guided city walking and country hiking. Prices from £2130 per person based on two people sharing.

YOUR GUIDE

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and modern pilgrims, past mellow-yellow stone hamlets and grass verges bursting with delicate wild orchids and poppies. The pace was brisk, but gentler on the climbs, with time to read the moving monuments to anti-Fascist Resistance fighters killed in World War II, heed birdsong, track wild boar prints.

With 10 kilometres under our belts we looked forward to expanding them a notch with our courtyard lunch prepared by Annabelle, whose support vehicle would ferry any stragglers unable to tackle any more hiking. There were none.

Over succulent strawberries and strong coffee Jackie regaled us with a reading from *A Day in Tuscany*, a charming ritual to help us digest our food and engage with our surroundings.

Refreshed and raring to go we refilled our water containers (no throw-away plastic allowed) and headed to the organic farm and wine estate of Bichi Borghesi (www.bichiborghesi.it) to sample their produce and admire the formal gardens with English roses and lemon trees.

In the cool kitchens of a nearby country villa we learned the art of ravioli under the merry tutelage of chef Orietta Siviero. (www.diningintuscany.com).

The secret, once you have broken a farm-fresh egg into a well of 100g durum wheat flour, is elbow grease: energetically kneading the mixture before rolling it out within a centimetre of its life until almost transparent.

We covered ourselves in flour and glory, dolloping on a filling of ricotta and asparagus, making neat parcels before popping them into boiling water. And hey presto, our pasta supper was served.

As the sun dipped we lifted our glasses of Chianti Senesi to our favourite toast: another day of hedonistic hiking.



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